

Breakout Session: Messaging – Moderator Igor Houwat, Michigan State University

The messaging breakout session had three main themes: universities and national labs face similar struggles with coordination, how important it is to get buy-in across the institution for your messaging, and the logistics of developing a messaging strategy.

Many universities and national laboratories face challenges because of how communications staff members are distributed throughout the organization. While some had centralized communications offices, many had communications people in multiple program, user facility, or college offices in addition to the head “public affairs” office. People in the main communications offices at these institutions said that communications people in programs or colleges have so much autonomy (and answer to different leadership) that it can be difficult to work with them. On the flip side, communications people in programs said that the main messages that the central offices created either weren’t related to their research or were too vague to integrate into their work.

The group discussed how part of improving that coordination involves getting buy-in on messaging from people on all levels of the institution. A number of people had questions about what to do if their efforts met resistance from senior scientists or other program staff members. Leslie Krohn from Argonne – who conducted a messaging effort at her lab – said that one of the key parts of getting buy-in was conducting 40 interviews with people throughout the lab. She asked people for their ideas on the lab’s strengths, grouped similar ideas that arose multiple times, and went to a new set of people to “test” those themes. She said the relationship building was essential to the effort, especially because she started with people who already supported communications. Other people’s advice to get leadership or scientists on board included presenting data, keeping them updated on the communication office’s activities, showing them that you know and appreciate their science, and offering help with communications products like posters.

There was also a lot of interest in how to develop a messaging strategy, especially on a tight budget. Igor Houwat did the strategy for MSU’s Plant Research Lab himself, but it is a fairly small program. Krohn said she did much of the strategy herself, but spent about \$10,000 to have an outside agency analyze their media and social media coverage.

People were also very interested in coordinating messaging across institutions. This is especially relevant when multiple institutions have worked on the same project, both with DOE and between labs/universities. There was interest in creating a database of science-relevant PIOs as well as building off of overarching messages from DOE.